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Chapter 4

The Revival of the Funeral Industry in Shanghai: a Model for China

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A cosmopolitan megacity that stands apart from China's political and cultural centres, Shanghai was formerly the heart of a highly dynamic funeral industry. Following a fifty-year interlude under the Maoist regime, the city is now seeking to revive this pioneering tradition. Although death is no more visible here than in China's other major cities, for the past twenty or so years Shanghai has endeavoured to compromise with market forces in order to create a new funeral culture reflecting the ambitions of a new Chinese modernity and destined to serve as a model for the country. More than any other, the funeral industry that has emerged in Shanghai bears the traces of China's turbulent evolution over the past two centuries. This chapter will trace the main stages of the industry's history by placing it within the context of the major political, economic and social challenges of each period.

1- The rise and fall of Shanghai's funeral industry

During an initial phase spanning more than a century, from 1840 to the end of the 1970s, the funeral industry alternately experienced glory and decline in Shanghai. Three quite distinct periods succeeded each other: the age of the foreign concessions, the Maoist era and the events of the Cultural Revolution.

The first steps through contact with the West

The city's location at the mouth of Asia's longest river meant that at the beginning of the nineteenth century Shanghai was already a major centre of industrial production with a population of more than 300,000 inhabitants. Its streets were clogged with bodies – mainly those of children[1] –, blocking traffic and posing a threat to public health (Henriot, 2009). These bodies were collected by benevolent societies founded by local dignitaries, which, just like the English mutual-aid societies and the French brotherhoods of charity[2], ensured the

[1] Between 30,000 and 40,000 bodies were abandoned in the streets every year from the end of the 1920s through to the mid-1930s. Children made up the majority (close to 90% on average) since they were the first to fall victim to malnutrition and disease (Henriot, 2009, p.411 and p.414).

[2] For an in-depth analysis of the evolution of the French funeral industry readers will find it useful to consult Pascale Trompette's 2008 work *Le marché des défunts* (Market of the Deceased), Sciences Po Press, Paris.

material and spiritual accompaniment of the dead into the hereafter. Acting as an auxiliary to the then embryonic municipal government, these societies supplied coffins and buried stray bodies in the cemeteries they operated[3].

However, volunteer burial services were not the exclusive domain of charities. Certain resident communities, grouped together by religion or geographical origin, also mutualised the disposal of their dead. The Jewish community built a cemetery in 1862[4], followed by the Japanese (1873), the British (1863) and the French (1905). The neighbouring province of Zhejiang also supplied Shanghai with highly organised residents, such as those from the port town of Ningbo whose burial services disposed of one in six bodies. This community operated its own cemetery in Shanghai and undertook the return of its dead to their native region[5].

Yet these non-lucrative activities were unlikely to develop a genuine industry of death. The first attempts to run graveyards as business concerns in China can be attributed to the initiative of the British and Americans. As early as 1844, barely two years after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking which brought an end to the opium wars and gave victory to the United Kingdom over China, the British authorities built a private cemetery for foreigners in Shangdong Road (Shangdonglu Gongmu), now occupied by a gymnasium. In 1897, some fifty years later, the first private commercial crematorium was built near Jingan Temple. Chinese entrepreneurs also entered the arena. In 1909 they built the first Chinese commercial cemetery, Wanguo Gongmu. As its name suggests (*wanguo* means "10,000 countries"), this cemetery welcomed the deceased of any nationality. It owes the miraculous preservation of its grounds to the simple fact that it houses the remains of the "mother of modern China", Song Qingling[6].

The year 1924 saw the appearance of the first commercial funeral parlour in Shanghai, Wanguo Funeral Parlour, built by an American businessman and equipped with an autopsy table imported from France[7]. Commercial services devoted to organising funeral ceremonies were unheard of in the Chinese tradition. Funerals were performed within the home of the deceased and the death announced publically by displaying funeral hangings on the outside of the building. Chinese entrepreneurs were quick to realise the benefits of outsourcing these ceremonies to dedicated facilities. They consequently increased the number of funeral parlours (called *binyiguan*) throughout the 1930s, all the while mastering American techniques in corpse preservation. The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War led to a sudden surge in the number of bodies. In 1938 more than 60,000 bodies were recorded in the city's streets, an average of 165 per day (Henriot, 2009, p.414). This situation brought about an

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[3] In addition to collecting the dead, these charitable organisations were responsible for protecting children and the elderly, providing emergency services, supplying food and occasionally running hospitals and schools.

[4] Shanghai's Jewish community had four cemeteries before 1949. They were moved to the western suburbs in the 1950s and then destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

[5] According to information displayed at the Shanghai Funeral Museum.

[6] Song Qingling was the second wife of Sun Yat Sen. Having been won over to the Communist cause she was the only member of her family to remain in China after 1949, where she devoted herself to fighting for children's causes. As a member of a "capitalist" family she risked persecution during the Cultural Revolution, but Zhou Enlai arranged for her to be included on a list of party leaders to be protected. He also sent the army in order to prevent the destruction of her family's tomb at Wanguo Gongmu cemetery. The cemetery was redeveloped in 1972, after which a mausoleum for Song Qingling was constructed in 1984.

[7] *Shanghai Funeral Museum*, 2010, published by the FIS, p.57.

"unhealthy prosperity[8]" within the funeral industry. At the end of the thirties Shanghai had a total of thirty-three *binyiguan*, sixty-seven coffin depots and over one hundred cemeteries[9].

The wide-ranging reforms of the Maoist era

The change of regime in 1949 was to mark a major turning point in the approach to the issue of funerals in China. The CPC viewed everything related to beliefs on death and the pomp that accompanied it with repugnance. The idea that the deceased could affect the living according to the way death rituals were performed was in direct conflict with the fundamental Communist contention that each individual is responsible for his own fate. The funeral professions that made a living from these beliefs were particularly despised, and none more so than the *fengshui*[10] masters whose moral authority threatened the CPC's control over the nation's minds (Whyte, 1988).

The financial consequences of these customs were deemed to be even graver. Exorbitant sums of money were invested in funerals by the wealthiest families in spectacles of all kind, sumptuous banquets and extravagant funeral processions. Even the Jesuit missionaries were astounded by the extent of Chinese excess and this despite them being accustomed to funeral ostentation in Europe. The status of the deceased could be gauged by the duration of their funeral. Some remained in the main hallway of their homes for several years whilst they awaited an auspicious date and site for burial, their heavy coffins enveloped in a bituminous substance designed to contain the gases associated with decomposition. During this time the families would continue going to considerable expense to celebrate the funeral, to such an extent that the overall cost could reach the equivalent of four years' income (Whyte, 1988, p.294). Even the funerals of farmers and workers cost on average three or four months' salary (Standaert, 2008).

As far as the new regime was concerned, these practices represented a colossal waste of resources which needed to be stopped. This waste concerned not only family incomes, which could be directed towards industries deemed less frivolous, but also resources relating to the raw materials used in making coffins and votive papers (wood and metals). Not to mention the considerable amount of land occupied by graveyards in large cities and the proliferation of graves scattered in fields, preventing mechanised farming methods from being implemented. In the face of this situation cremation came to be seen as a panacea. Less predatory in terms of resources, it presented the further advantage of lessening the symbolic power of funeral rituals by eliminating their main focus: the body of the deceased. Yet the generalisation of cremation was not self-evident for it was rather negatively viewed in the China of the 1950s. Rare were those who practiced it by choice. This category of persons included Buddhist monks and foreigners, in particular the British and Japanese. For everyone else, cremation was associated with the poverty of the graveless bodies that littered the streets and were burned in great stacks of coffins.

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[8] According to the terms employed by the Shanghai Funeral Museum (*binzangye de buzheng fanro*).

[9] *Shanghai Funeral Museum*, op. cit. p.43. With the exception of one in the Pudong area, the cemeteries were all located to the west of the Huangpu River.

[10] *Fengshui* (literally "wind and water") is a Taoist art which aims to ensure that human acts are performed in harmony with the universe. It determines the choice of auspicious locations for civil and religious buildings, homes and graves. These should face towards the south, the yang direction (masculine direction).

In 1954 an extensive campaign was launched to promote cremation. A promotional poster from this period on display at the Shanghai Funeral Museum provides a detailed account of the savings accredited to cremation by the authorities: by exclusively performing it in Shanghai for one year, one could theoretically acquire two ships weighing over 2,000 tonnes, 325 lorries and 102 tractors, as well as build dormitories for 77,277 workers and 51 schools for 900 students[11].

Despite the strength of these arguments cremation was not readily accepted by the Chinese people. Thus, at the end of the 1950s the CPC adopted a more coercive strategy. It imposed a radical reform of funeral rituals, which from thereon were required to take place in public *binyiguan*[12]. This reform introduced five major changes: cremation instead of burial; replacing the burning of votive paper and scented candles with offerings of fresh flowers and artificial fruit; abolition of traditional mourning dress in favour of a black armband; secularisation of the funeral ceremony, to be placed under the authority of the *danwei* (work unit) instead of the family; and the disappearance of excessive signs of distress (prostration, wailing, crying, etc.) in favour of discreet signs of mourning (bowing of the head, contemplation, silence, etc.).

Although this reform was accepted in the cities – in this matter it is worth pointing out the remarkable compliance with these rules among rituals seen in Shanghai today – this was far from being the case in rural areas, where ancestral customs continued under the accommodating eye of local Party officials, aided by the countless cemeteries operated directly by village communities. As noted by Whyte (1988), in instigating this reform the CPC created a sharp urban-rural divide in China with regards to funerals which has continued to widen ever since.

An ironic twist of history meant that during the Great Leap Forward (1957-1963) the same fate befell urban cemeteries as it did the countryside. Mao's forced collectivisation of land led to the destruction of farming and caused unprecedented periods of famine. The cemeteries of Shanghai were requisitioned in the name of the slogan "transform graveyards into orchids; make the useless useful" in order to compensate for the lack of food supplies. These cemeteries were mainly used for the breeding of pigs[13], in addition to sheep, poultry and fish. Even the spaces between graves were used for growing cereals and vegetables[14]. Funeral authorities were ordered to pay more attention to the living than the dead – despite the latter being supplied in increasing numbers by the famines – by focusing on their farming production objectives[15].

The death of funerals during the Cultural Revolution

Towards the middle of the 1960s funeral affairs resumed their normal course. However, it was not long before the repercussions of the economic and humanitarian disaster of the Great Leap Forward became apparent. Marginalised within the Party, Mao Zedong was forced to step

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[11] *Shanghai Funeral Museum*, op. cit. p.74.
[12] Some of these *binyiguan* were former private funeral parlours nationalised in 1949.
[13] According to information displayed at the funeral museum Shanghai's cemeteries contained 88 pigsties breeding 770 pigs.
[14] Information at the Shanghai Funeral Museum.
[15] There are no official figures concerning the number of deaths during this period but authorised experts put the number of victims caused by the periods of famine at 30 million across the country.

down as state president. He sought to regain power in 1966 by mobilising the country's student youth. The young Red Guards were encouraged to purge the Party of its "revisionist elements" and eradicate traditional values from Chinese culture. Their reign of terror continued for three years as they relentlessly hunted down the "Four Olds" – old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Needless to say, funeral activities featured high on the list. The Red Guards would raid the homes of individuals and confiscate or burn their ancestral tablets[16]. They proceeded to close the *binyiguan* in an effort to suppress all sentimentality shown towards remains. Only Longhua and Baoxing crematoria continued to function, with massacres and suicides providing their daily lot of fresh corpses (5,000 deaths caused by the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai in 1968 alone[17]). Bodies were systematically cremated, even those of Muslims for whom inhumation had previously been tolerated. Considered the symbol par excellence of bourgeois elements to be purged, graves were desecrated, plundered and destroyed. They were put to new use as building materials and were scattered throughout the four corners of the city's suburbs[18]. No civil burial ground remained unscathed, the Red Guards even going as far as exhuming the bodies of "renegades" in order to educate the masses.

Internal opposition in the CPC against the Cultural Revolution, in particular by officials of the Shanghai municipality, led to the closing of the Bureau of Civil Affairs -in charge of cemetery management- in January 1967. Six months later cemeteries were placed under the supervision of the army and the police before being requisitioned for other uses[19]. The inhabitants of Shanghai were thus forced to turn to neighbouring regions to bury their dead, regions from which many of them had in fact originated.

In 1968 Mao finally put a stop to the excesses of the Red Guards, which he himself had instigated, and did not hesitate to arrest and imprison them in political re-education camps. A full-scale civil war broke out and was followed by a bitter struggle for power between the various factions of the CPC after Mao's death, plunging China into chaos. The advent of Deng Xiaoping to the head of the Central Committee in 1978 represented the dawning of a new era. Market forces were allowed to breathe new life into the funeral industry. However, the break with previous funeral customs instigated by the Maoist regime had been well and truly assimilated. It was therefore upon new foundations that Shanghai was to revive its talents as a pioneering city in the funeral arena.

2- The revival of the funeral industry under close supervision

Maoism had left a deep mark on the landscape of mortuary practices in urban China. Several major changes had taken place, including the disappearance of cemeteries from the heart of the cities, the spread of cremation, the secularisation of funerals and the centralisation of funeral services in the hands of the *binyiguan*. The Shanghai Municipal Government sought to

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[16] Memorial items enabling the dead to be honoured within the home (see chapter 2).

[17] Figure cited by Philipp P. Pan (2008, p.84). There are no official statistics concerning the number of deaths during the Cultural Revolution but Chinese experts agree that the victims, both direct and indirect (suicides, etc.) numbered 30 million across the country.

[18] An Israeli photographer managed to assemble seventy tombstone slabs originating from the four former Jewish cemeteries in Shanghai. Whilst carrying out his investigations in the suburbs he also discovered a large number of Christian tombstones, notably in villages in the western part of the metropolitan area. Having been put to use by migrants as they set up home, these stones were being used to make sinks, tables or flooring within homes.

[19] *Shanghai Funeral Museum*, op. cit. p.110.

position itself on the remerging funeral market by drawing on these transformations to create a modern industry free of its "vestiges of superstition". With this in mind it chose to liberalise the creation of cemeteries and professionalise the funeral industry without actually relaxing its tight hold on such activities.

Opening up the creation of cemeteries to the market economy

The Cultural Revolution wiped most cemeteries off the map of Shanghai, simultaneously erasing traces of its painful memory[20]. This amnesia was extremely welcome at a time when the CPC was seeking to preserve its legitimacy whilst severing its ties with Maoism. In consequence, Shanghai only resurrected its mortuary sites from the 1980s onwards, meaning that, disturbingly, the majority of the city's cemeteries are just thirty years old[21]. Today there are forty-four cemeteries in addition to ten ossuaries (*guhuitang*), structures that house cinerary urns placed in small niches.

This new generation of funerary sites differs from the previous one in many respects. First, they are located in outlying areas; partly due to the lack of space in central areas but also due to residents' aversion to living in close proximity to death[22]. Second, such establishments are more evenly distributed throughout the urban space. With the city having crossed over the Huangpu River in 1990 Shanghai's centre of gravity has shifted towards the eastern section of the city and been replaced by the Pudong business district. The cemeteries accompanied this movement, as did the ossuaries, which have been built in even greater concentration on the east bank of the Huangpu River. Even the islands of Changxing, Hengsha and Chongming each have one or more cemeteries. Nevertheless, what really distinguishes the two generations of mortuary sites is the way they are run: following a long interlude during the Maoist era they are once again commercial operations.

As early as 1986 private capital was invested in the construction of a cemetery in Shanghai: a first in China. This public-private partnership[23] was responsible for creating the largest cemetery in the city (80 hectares), Binhai Guyuan, located thirty-five kilometres south of the city on the coast. This represented a major innovation. A prototype of China's new generation funerary sites, this landscaped cemetery bore no resemblance to the dreary *gongmu*[24] of the Maoist era. A casual glance at the south-facing graves brings to mind the elegant, symmetrical angles of the Ideal City and the words of Vladimir Jankélévitch: "the dead do not arise to disturb the city[25]". On the contrary, the pleasant grounds inspire harmony between the living

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[20] A small cemetery in Chongqing with a 500-grave capacity is the only one in China to still honour the memory of those who died during the Cultural Revolution. The other cemeteries in the city (a dozen in total) which housed the victims of this bloody episode were all destroyed upon Mao's death in 1976. Chongqing cemetery narrowly missed being turned into a theme park but the legal successors of the graves protested against the project and succeeded in protecting the cemetery (Pan, 2008).

[21] With the exception of Yongan (1958) and Wanguo (1972) cemeteries.

[22] With the exception of military cemeteries, some of which are located in the city centre and visited by tourists and school groups.

[23] Originally the freeholders of the surrounding areas had planned to build a cemetery to optimise their land. Since the Shanghai Municipal Government was looking for land in order to construct a new cemetery it suggested undertaking the operation as a partnership. The joint company is a mixed enterprise with 51% public capital.

[24] The term *gongmu*, which literally means "public cemetery", refers to ordinary cemeteries. Only ten of Shanghai's forty-four cemeteries are *gongmu*.

[25] Vladimir Jankélévitch (1994), *Penser la mort?* (On Death), Liana Levi, Piccolo collection, essay, p.111.

and the dead. Although enclosed, the cemetery is open to the public and presents itself as a park offering recreation and walking spaces. Canalised watercourses, meticulously maintained vegetation and sculptures with a realist-socialist air compete with the prolific design of the graves which often borders on the kitsch. And in fact, it is precisely of a park or garden that this cemetery bears the name: Binhai Guyuan means "old seaside garden or park". All of the cemeteries modelled on Binhai Guyuan use the character *yuan* to create at times lyrical names such as "the garden of closed eyes" (*mingyuan*).

The paragon in this domain is without doubt Fushouyuan, the fruit of a partnership between the Shanghai Municipal Government and a private company that runs six other cemeteries co-financed by foreign capital, notably Taiwanese. Embodying "prosperity and longevity" through its name, Fushouyuan is a veritable showcase for Shanghai's funeral industry. What was merely a preliminary sketch at Binhai Guyuan has found fuller expression here in the form of sophisticated landscaped compositions, numerous recreation areas and hospitality and catering services. Religion is practiced without inhibition in a Buddhist place of worship that is apparently highly active. And to overcome any lingering doubts on behalf of undecided customers, a permanent exhibition of the personal items of famous celebrities who lie within the grounds bears witness to the state-of-the-art nature of the cemetery.

In 2004 the authorities allowed private initiative free reign to develop gravesites without a public partnership. Yet few entrepreneurs have taken the plunge[26]. In truth, this type of project is not without risk. The acute pressure exerted on land in urban centres means that development projects are pushed to the edge of rural zones to sites with poor accessibility. The danger for the developer is therefore of alienating their urban clientele yet without being able to satisfy local demand, which is hardly inclined to opt for these urban-style graves. In addition to this financial risk there is the political risk. Although making a profit has become a positive value in China, the same cannot be said for the death trade. The CPC prides itself on having guaranteed each individual the dignity of a grave through its funeral reforms[27]. It would have difficulty accepting this being flouted by the excesses of an unbridled grave market tailoring its services uniquely to the luxury sector. In the funeral industry the notion of free enterprise is therefore relative. Pressure from the authorities is such that in certain areas private initiative is completely suffocated. This is particularly the case in Beijing where the central government's presence prevents the flourishing of landscaped cemeteries. Out of a total of thirty-three graveyards the Chinese capital counts only four landscaped cemeteries, all of which are run in partnership with local authorities.

The spread of cremation and persistence of cemeteries

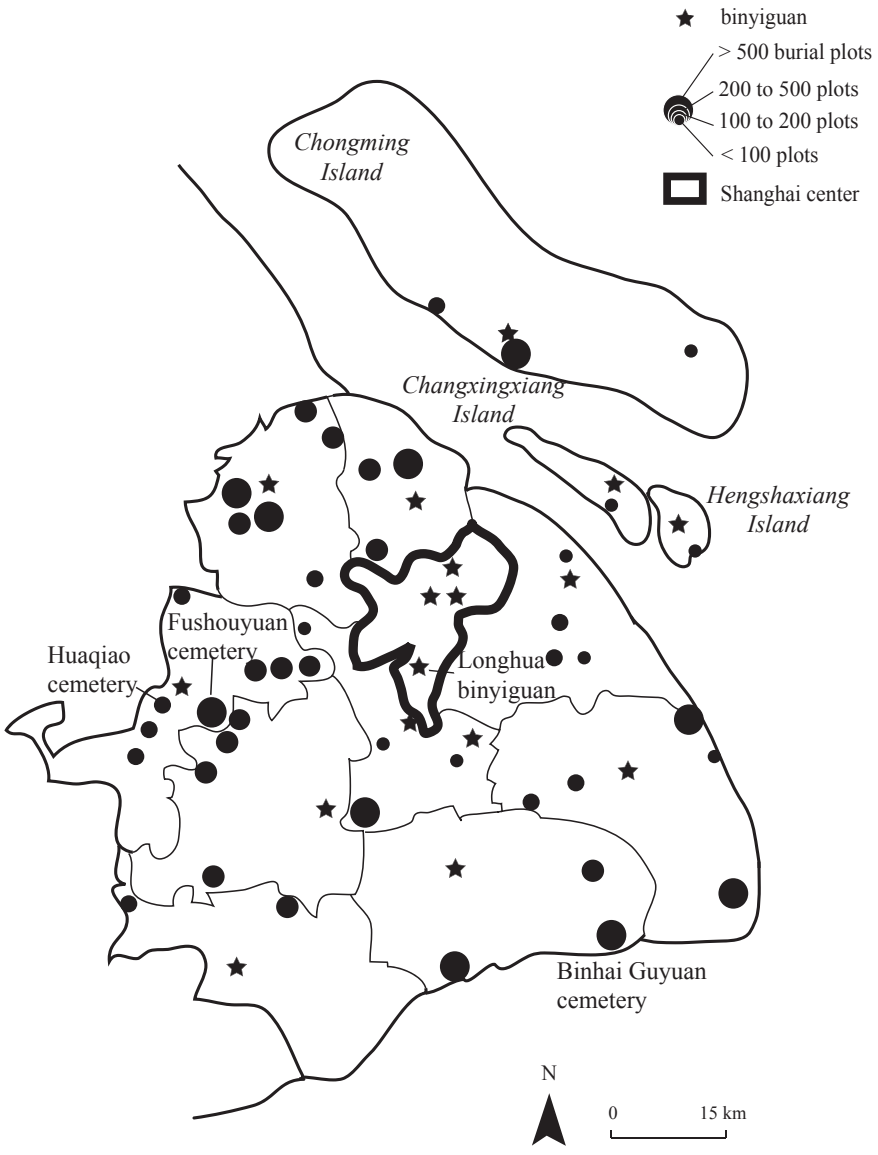
This enthusiasm for cemeteries, the very place where bodies are buried in the ground, may seem surprising in a country where cremation is so vigorously promoted. If figures from the China Funeral Association are to be believed, the national territory has a total of some 2,000

[26] In this category we can also mention a cemetery built in the centre of Chongming Island by a cement manufacturer who runs another cemetery in Mongolia. Despite the extremely poor accessibility of the site (more than two hours from the centre of Shanghai by boat and taxi), the plots are barely cheaper than those in Shanghai's landscaped cemeteries. The developer is anticipating the construction of a second bridge between Shanghai and Chongming, which should facilitate the development of Dongtan, the future "eco-city". According to initial estimates this city should have had between 50,000 and 80,000 inhabitants in 2010, rising to 500,000 in 2050, but the project only really got underway in 2010.

[27] It is difficult to support this view if one takes into account such dark episodes as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

commercial cemeteries in addition to 100,000 ossuaries and subsidised cemeteries28. These data do not include the innumerable rural funerary sites managed by village communities and concern for the most part the urban areas of large cities. Ossuaries are thus taking root throughout the country. The majority of cemeteries provide ossuaries in various forms within their grounds in order to offer low-cost grave space. Two options exist: funerary walls measuring several metres (*bizang*) and funerary towers (*guhuitang*). However, supply in terms of small-sized interment plots remains remarkably weak in Shanghai's urban zone where only ten large ossuaries have been constructed independently of cemeteries.

Map 4-1. Map of the cemeteries in Shanghai (Source: the author)



28 China Funeral Association, http://bzxh.mca.gov.cn/english4.asp

Some of these structures combine an innovative spatial disposition with sophisticated services, making them a plausible alternative to the landscaped cemetery. An example of this is Meiguiyuan, a four-floor ossuary managed by a mixed enterprise with Taiwanese capital. Designed by a Canadian architect and equipped with a 24-hour surveillance system, this structure makes reference to the "garden" category through its name (*meiguiyuan* means "rose garden"), despite it having more in common with a shopping centre. The upper floors feature narrow corridors leading to memorial halls which alternate with cosy, intimate and often windowless rooms full of glass-front niches displaying photos of the deceased with their cherished belongings. In a major infringement of the rules, prices here are skilfully adjusted in line with *fengshui* criteria, increasing by floor and differing according to the direction faced, despite the lack of sunlight. Prices reach their peak on the final floor where they represent eleven times the average salary in Shanghai[29] or the cost of a plot in a landscaped cemetery. In reality, this type of grave attracts above all a clientele from Taiwan where land constraints mean there is a well-established custom of using funerary towers.

Could Meiguiyuan foreshadow the funerary option of tomorrow's urban China? Whatever the case may be, for the moment landscaped cemeteries remain the preferred option, a choice which authorities ascribe to the agrarian tropism, real or imagined, of the Chinese people. The template for landscaped cemeteries is not to be found in rural gravesites, which are unimposing spaces with insecure usage rights located on the outskirts of villages. The urban cemetery of today is based on its erstwhile counterpart, namely the *gongmu*, shaped through contact with the West, embellished with traditional Chinese motifs (entrance gates and statues reminiscent of Imperial China) and crossed with elements borrowed from other contemporary funeral cultures, notably Taiwanese, American and Japanese. The result of a subtle hybridisation, it sees itself as both the natural heir to ancestral Chinese tradition and the cornerstone of a new and commonplace service industry.

In these new deathspaces the vast family vaults have been replaced by standard graves containing one or two urns, reflecting the model of the modern nuclear family. The duration of usage rights linked to interment plots varies according to local regulations (seventy years in Shanghai in general). Although cremation has been made compulsory in Chinese cities the situation varies according to the characteristics of suburban areas. Beijing, for example, contains six mountainous zones, within which inhumation is permitted due to topographical constraints. Unsurprisingly, Shanghai leads the way with a cremation rate of over eighty per cent across its territory compared to the official national average of 52.7 per cent[30].

Furthermore, certain cities, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, grant special permission for foreigners to be buried. Amongst the Chinese, Muslim minorities also enjoy this privilege. Their bodies are interred in the "Hui cemeteries[31]", burial grounds that are subsidised by local authorities. The Hui cemetery in Shanghai was established in 1980 thanks to a land opportunity that arose in an industrial zone in the southern suburbs. Muslims are able to

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[29] Representing 37,000 yuan in 2008. The average salary in Shanghai in 2008 was 3,292 yuan (source: the Shanghai Statistics Bureau).
[30] China Funeral Association, op. cit.
[31] Of the fifty-five minorities officially recognised in Chin, ten are mainly Muslim. The Hui account for almost half of all Muslims; the rest are divided among the Uyghur, Kirgiz, Tajik, Uzbek, Dongxiang, Salar, Bonan and Tatar ethnic groups. The "Hui cemeteries" welcome all of these minorities.

purchase large marble graves in this cemetery at a quarter of the price practiced in landscaped cemeteries.

Another category of Chinese dispensed from the requirement to practise cremation is the *Huaqiao*: Overseas Chinese belonging to old communities of emigrants who have retained ties with the mother country. Long considered traitors, their capital, knowledge of the business world and scientific abilities have made them highly sought after since China opened up its economy. The authorities have granted them considerable privileges in an effort to entice them back to Chinese soil, including tax benefits, a preferential policy for purchasing private cars and apartments, the possibility of importing computer equipment, special dispensation from the one-child policy… and the right to be buried in a dedicated cemetery. As is its usual custom, in 1986 Shanghai became one of the first cities to construct a site for the burial of *Huaqiao*. Many such cemeteries exist in other major cities such as Guangzhou, Nanking, Beihai, Kaifeng, Dongshan, Jieyang, Wuxi, Changzhou and Suzhou.

The *Huaqiao* cemetery in Shanghai distinguishes itself from others by its extravagant tombs and mausoleums. Although it is meticulously maintained, it is not intended to be opened to the public. And with good reason: the cemetery offers the kind of burial conditions the Chinese can only dream of and which have been banned by the Communist regime for the past sixty years.

Indeed, the attachment of the Chinese to burial is still deeply ingrained in rural China. As much for the post-mortem well-being of the deceased as to ensure their transformation into a benevolent ancestor, it is vital that remains are conserved in their entirety and treated with the utmost respect. In the past this requirement even led eunuchs to have themselves buried along with their genitalia. Thus during the Maoist era burial continued to be practiced as far as possible in rural areas since authorities concentrated their efforts on the cities.

Despite a wave of liberalism sweeping over graves following the opening up of the economy, the policy with regards the disposal of bodies has on the contrary tightened. Since the 1990s the authorities have gone on the attack against rural areas – places where "feudal superstitions" requiring eradication have lived on. Funerary sites to which village communities held an exclusive right of usage have been declared illegal and the inhabitants ordered to move the graves, not without first cremating the remains (David, 1996, see chapter 3). By evacuating village gravesites in this way the authorities hope to succeed where Maoism failed in seeing China's rich traditional funeral culture progressively destroyed.

Placed within a context of economic openness, this ban on burials has also had the unfortunate effect of generating a black market in corpses. At the beginning of the 2000s mafia gangs began to exhume "fresh" remains from graves and sell them to families who would have them cremated in the place of their loved-one, who could then be buried in secret. As demand grew, the gangs took to murdering the elderly and handicapped so that burials could continue right under the authorities' noses. A ring involved in this type of trade was broken up in 2008 in Puning, a town located 200 kilometres from the Shenzen-Hong Kong conurbation. For the meagre sum of 10,000 yuan (100 euros), more than a hundred people were sacrificed in the name of the sacredness of the corpse[32].

[32] Deadly harvest, *South China Morning Post*, 22 November 2008.

The FIS: secular arm of China's funeral policy

Whilst in the countryside funerary sites are being standardised, in urban centres the funeral industry is becoming more structured and professional under the guidance of the authorities. The Shanghai municipality has armed itself with a powerful public operator responsible for supervising funeral activities within the city and stimulating innovation in the sector. Founded in 1998 under the authority of the Civil Affairs Bureau, this establishment goes by the name of the FIS (Funeral Interment Service), an acronym whose pronunciation in Chinese, based on the characters *feisi* ("soaring of the mind"), somewhat softens the organisation's image. Yet the FIS fully embraces its line of business, as indicated by the extraordinary succession of 4s that makes up their hotline number (64644444)[33].

No other major Chinese city has an organisation the size of the FIS[34]. Not only does it exercise control over all of the city's grave and funeral establishments, it is also responsible for running the largest of these facilities: Shanghai's three large *binyiguan* (Longhua, Baoxing and Yishan) as well as six cemeteries[35], including Binhai Guyuan which, as we have seen, played a pivotal role in propagating the landscaped cemetery model.

The FIS also provides a wide variety of services within its *binyiguan* and cemeteries. It sells funeral accessories manufactured in its four production units. Some of these items are sold in Korea, thus contributing to Shanghai's role as a major export centre for funeral accoutrements[36]. At the same time the FIS carries out research activities via three small organisations. Two of these are devoted to highly technical matters focused on cremation methods and corpse preservation. They have patented an antiseptic product that slows down the decomposition of the corpse for one day. This product is now used in all of Shanghai's *binyiguan* and has even been exported to Japan[37]. The third research centre is responsible for disseminating knowledge on funeral culture by publishing specialist books and journals in partnership with universities. It was to this centre that the task of designing China's first funeral museum, established in Longhua *binyiguan* in 2008, was entrusted. Featuring relics saved from attacks by the Red Guards and numerous information displays containing text and illustrations, the museum is an open book on the glorious past of the local funeral industry. The official discourse presented there plays down the darkest events of the Cultural Revolution, thereby establishing the funeral industry as a continuation of China's recent history, all the while legitimising the positioning of Shanghai at its forefront.

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[33] The number 4 is pronounced "*si"*, just like death, and as such has sinister connotations.

[34] The city of Guangzhou has an older funerary establishment of the same type, but much smaller, which was founded in 1961. More recently (2008-2009) smaller cities have entrusted the management of their funeral affairs to autonomous public establishments (Urumqi, Dunhuang, Dashiqiao, Wu, Tongliao, Harbin, Jilin and Bole).

[35] The other cemeteries are Zhuanqiao, Dianshanhu, Weijiajiao and Xujing (cf. map of Shanghai cemeteries).

[36] Of the 6,000 manufacturers and 3,000 commercial businesses exporting products in this sector (in particular wooden coffins), more than seventy per cent are concentrated in the two provinces that border Shanghai: Anhui and Zhejiang (according to figures from the Ali Baba database).

[37] This product was patented by a small private company housed by the FIS at Baoxing *binyiguan*. Its extremely low cost enables almost all of the deceased in Shanghai's main *binyiguan* to be treated. Eight per cent of production is exported to Japan (Lenoir, 2008).

The pivotal role of the binyiguan

The decision to locate the museum in Longhua *binyiguan* was no coincidence. This establishment, which is also operated by the FIS, sees itself as the prototype of an emerging generation which, just like the landscaped cemeteries, seeks to be modern and attractive. Inherited from the funeral parlours of the foreign concessions and revisited by Maoism, the *binyiguan* are "one-stop centres" undertaking the entire range of services made necessary by a death: transporting and conserving the corpse in refrigerated lockers; providing ceremony halls; cremating the remains (on site or at the nearest crematorium); and returning the ashes to the family. In short, the modus operandi of these establishments is to "capture" the body: the deceased has barely expired before his or her body is taken away from the family, briefly exhibited during the funeral ceremony, and then returned to relatives in an urn (chapter 5). By hindering in this way the gradual process of detachment from the corpse, which would normally take place during mourning, the *binyiguan* are helping to sap the foundations of traditional funeral rites.

Funerals are carried out in rows of halls in expeditious fashion at a rate of barely one hour per ceremony. Those at Longhua *binyiguan*, the establishment most used by foreigners, are reputed to be more "dignified" and "civilised" than elsewhere since ritual wailing and weeping is filtered out thanks to the above-average prices. The secular nature of the facility also plays a part. The impression of being in a shopping centre is further reinforced by the rows of sales desks selling interment plots where visitors in search of a grave wander. Services aimed at wealthy customers, such as accommodation for wakes, have also been introduced here.

As exemplary as it is, Longhua *binyiguan* nonetheless remains an exception in China's funerary landscape. Fairly unattractive indoor spaces and mediocre reception services generally characterise these establishments. The development of landscaped cemeteries has further reinforced the perception of the *binyiguan* as being obsolete, leading private developers to demand that services be evened out across the board. But from here to opening up the *binyiguan* to the market economy was evidently a step the authorities were not prepared to take.

Why such resistance? Let us not forget that the *binyiguan* were created under the Maoist regime to guarantee low-cost disposal of corpses and ensure that ceremonial rites conformed to CPC norms. Privatisation would no doubt jeopardise the pursuit of these objectives. Any rise in the cost of services linked to cremation, which is currently set at a derisory sum, would lead to the failure of the current policy of fostering cremation, not to mention the inevitable social repercussions. Liberalising ceremonial services would be no less dangerous: losing control over corpses might lead to a loss of control over minds and in turn open the door to extravagant funeral rituals through a return to "superstitious practices".

Although core funeral services, which are firmly anchored in the *binyiguan*, remain untouched, this has not prevented private services from flourishing. Funeral coordination services, in particular, are extremely popular with urban households who find themselves at a loss when a death occurs. This service is provided by the *binyiguan* at a modest price but private operators have created a very lucrative niche. Their web of contacts woven throughout the hospitals and neighbourhood committees provide information on deaths, allowing them to sell services immediately to the bereaved families. Their activities consist of preparing and organising the ceremony in the *binyiguan*, as well as the restaurant banquet that brings the

funeral to a close. They can be easily spotted in front of the ceremony halls surrounded by piles of gifts for those attending the ceremony (handkerchiefs, confectionery, tea, etc.). Some of them have no qualms about substantially increasing the price of the funerary goods they provide to customers. The opaque pricing of their services is in stark contrast with the transparency practiced at funerary establishments, in particular the *binyiguan*, where the options available are displayed on the entrance boards in the minutest detail, right down to the last yuan. Having come under fire in the press for their laxity with regards these service providers, the authorities are endeavouring to curb their abuses but are hesitant to hamper a market trying to free itself from the *binyiguans*' monopoly and creating a growing number of private companies, sometimes informal or nomadic in nature, generally found clustered around cemeteries and funerary establishments.

The *binyiguans*' stranglehold on corpses prevents private initiative from flourishing in the field of corpse preparation. While in other Asian countries embalmment has established itself as an alternative method of ceremonial mise-en-scène, in China it is mainly used for transporting bodies[38] over long or short distances, a service that is provided by private operators.

Although it is unable to fully spread its wings the funeral industry has already attained a very respectable level in China. According to very rough estimates by the FIS, sales of graves total 184 billion yuan[39] (18 billion euros), a similar amount to its Japanese counterpart (16 billion euros, cf. chapter 1). By comparison, the funerary goods and services sector appears underdeveloped with 70,000 jobs created and turnover of sixteen billion yuan (1.6 billion euros or fourteen per cent of the Japanese market[40]). Be that as it may, these results are helping the industry to lessen the repulsion inspired by its professions, so much so that they are beginning to attract graduates from the country's top universities.

There remains much to be done in order to rid the industry of its unpalatable image. The authorities are devoting themselves to the task by standardising the industry in an effort to make it more commonplace. One of the first initiatives involved introducing a ranking system for landscaped cemeteries according to the level of services offered, which the FIS proceeded to do in 1999. Since then the criteria have become increasingly complex due to the emergence of environmental and quality norms of international standard (ISO standards 9000 and 14000) in the city's various funerary sites[41].

Standardisation also requires a certain level of training. A master's degree in funeral management has been created at the Shanghai University of Science and Technology in order to provide the future managers of cemeteries and *binyiguan* with the necessary technical expertise and general knowledge of death[42]. Chinese funeral professionals also have their own

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[38] Longhua *binyiguan* has an embalming centre used for repatriating the bodies of deceased foreigners.

[39] Estimate made in 2008 based on a price of 23,000 yuan per grave multiplied by the annual number of deaths (8 million). This amount is undoubtedly considerably overestimated since a large proportion of the bodies are in rural cemeteries.

[40] According to an estimate by the FIS which involves multiplying the average cost of a funeral, estimated at 2,000 yuan (in Shanghai it is increased to 5,000 yuan), by the annual number of deaths in China. The figure for Japan represents the turnover of funeral businesses for the same services (1,350 billion yen, cf. chapter 1).

[41] In 2001 Baoxing *binyiguan* became the first to receive ISO certification.

[42] The creation of this course in 2006 led Beijing University, after some procrastination, to organise a class on funeral affairs in its philosophy department.

international trade fair organised by the FIS under the banner "Funexpo Shanghai". However, this event is barely known outside of eastern China. Shanghai's position as a pioneer within China is evidently not enough to make it an international "hub" for the funeral industry. It is the duo Hong Kong–Macao that recently claimed this title thanks to the success of Asian Funeral Expo, which enjoys the powerful backing of American professional organisations.

3- New challenges for deathspaces

In the two decades that followed China's policy of openness authorities concentrated their efforts on propagating attractive gravesite models in order to guarantee the revival of the funeral industry. Since then, however, new matters for concern have arisen. Like other countries, China is set to experience an ageing of her population, a phenomenon that will be further exacerbated by the one-child policy. A growing number of deaths is thus set to influence the fate of the large cities. How can China hope to guarantee universal access to a grave in this situation and avoid mortuary activities becoming a nuisance to the living?

Reducing the footprint of deathspaces

The equation is a simple one: in 2009 there were 120,000 deaths in Shanghai; by 2050 this figure will have doubled (Gu, Qiao, Zhou, 2003). Admittedly not all of the deceased are interred within Shanghai. Approximately one quarter of the city's residents own grave space in the neighbouring cities of Suzhou, Ningbo and Shaoxing or in rural cemeteries in the adjoining provinces. However, demand for graves in Shanghai is set to quickly outstrip the capacity of its fifty or so gravesites. Municipal regulations have set the maximum size of an individual plot in cemeteries at 1.5 square metres, yet at this rate the FIS estimates that the city's cemeteries will be full by 2016[43]. Since the city authorities do not want to encourage the creation of new cemeteries they are obliged to find alternative solutions.

One solution entails reducing the "ecological footprint" of death by reducing the size of interment plots. Developers of landscaped cemeteries have already been requested to reduce the size of individual graves to one square metre. It is in their interest to comply, despite this reduction in size being unpopular with buyers. The construction of ossuaries and cinerary pagodas is also set to increase steadily, as these structures provide on average twenty times more plots than landscaped cemeteries. The short-term objective for the Shanghai Municipal Government is to succeed in attaining a thirty per cent proportion of "space-saving graves" (*jiedi zangshi*).

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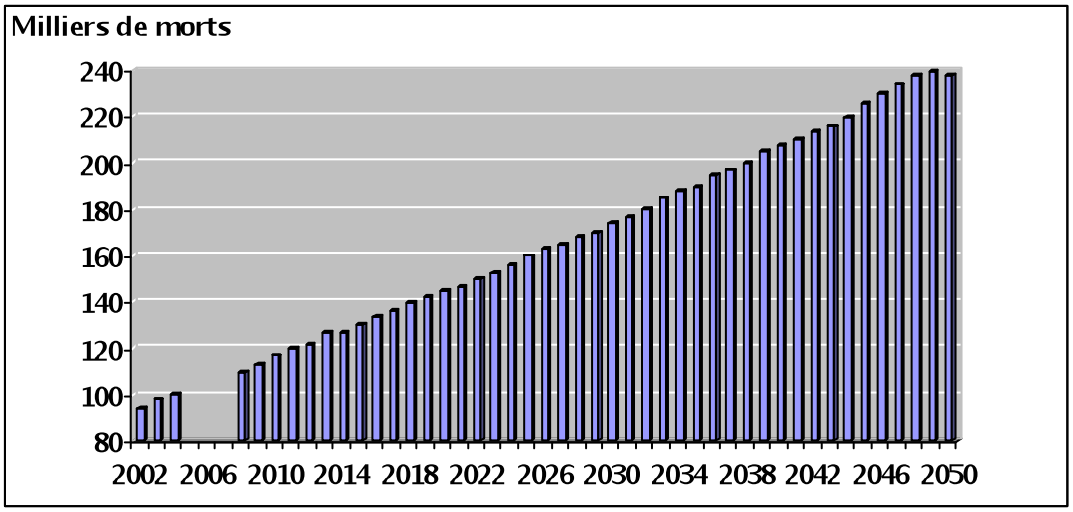
[43] Shanghai running out of cemeteries, *China Daily*, 22 December 2007. Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-12/22/content_6340761.htm

Graph 1. Estimated number of deaths in Shanghai between 2002 and 2050 (source: Gu, Qiao, Zhou, 2003)



Supposing that everyone can be successfully accommodated in smaller plots, the fact remains that with the soaring number of deaths, graveyards are destined to occupy a growing place in the urban space. The notion of sustainability has thus gained ground here as elsewhere. Cemeteries at saturation point are considered to be "dead" spaces for the city (*simu*: "dead cemetery"), in contrast to "sustainable" cemeteries, in other words sites where interment plots can be recycled. Plot leases currently run for seventy years and in theory are renewable, although some graves will most likely cease to be tended after three generations. However, many Shanghai's cemeteries are very new, having existed for less than twenty years, and it is over the next forty years in particular that demand for grave space is set to soar. Shanghai's authorities are therefore considering reducing the duration of leases to twenty years, with the possibility of renewing for a further ten.

Improving the social mix in gravesites

A further aim of these measures is to guarantee equality in death. The intervention of the private sector has led control over the cost of grave space and funerary accessories to be relaxed somewhat. Those wishing to honour the memory of their deceased relatives at great expense are spoilt for choice. Choosing a coffin made from nanmu[44] wood, an urn in precious stone and an exclusive cemetery like Fushouyuan is enough to see the bill rise to 30,000 euros[45]. This amount, equal to more than three years the average salary in Shanghai, shows that we have returned to pre-1949 levels.

The major difference is that, in principle, in this huge, partially subsidised funeral industry there is something for everyone. A fabric urn, a bamboo coffin, a minimum number of options at the *binyiguan* and an ossuary niche make it possible to give someone a "decent" funeral for three months' salary. An allowance equal to this amount is allocated to the inhabitants of Shanghai's urban area, regardless of their income, in order to cover death-related expenses.

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[44] This wood, which is made from around thirty varieties of evergreen "nanmu" trees, is considered to be the noblest in China thanks to its resistance to humidity and changes in temperature. It was traditionally used to build coffins and ships as well as make architectural creations.

[45] Respectively, 50,000 yuan for the coffin, 200,000 for the urn and 50,000 for the interment plot. These prices are also practiced by the FIS.

However, low-cost grave space is scarce. The common dream of being buried in a "grand" tomb in a landscaped cemetery requires at least ten months' salary. In order to give families time to organise themselves, the *binyiguan* will store urns temporarily for three years at a negligible cost. A lack of either means or descendants means that some bodies never make it past this initial stage in their residential journey. Hence, in 2008 two thousand abandoned urns remained in Shanghai's various city-centre *binyiguan*[46]. After a few years the ashes of these bodies are placed beneath a communal stele in a cemetery.

Special provisions have been made for poverty-stricken elderly persons without descendants in the form of free funerals and a grave in a public cemetery. In reality, the partial or full funding of such funerals by the *binyiguan* is not restricted to this category of the population, particularly in rural areas. A differentiation between the *binyiguan* according to their geographical location is thus gradually emerging, with those in outlying areas experiencing difficulties in balancing their finances.

The majority of the budget of bereaved families is swallowed up by the cost of the grave. The municipal authorities do not have much leeway to implement a welfare programme in this area because they only exercise full control over a small number of cemeteries. They must therefore convince private developers of the necessity of cooperating. In 2009 the Shanghai Municipal Government launched a programme aimed at freeing up 25,000 square metres of low-cost grave space in the city's cemeteries within three years. The majority of cemeteries already participate in this voluntary scheme. And in fact, operators of the most exclusive sites are not the least enthusiastic to put aside grave space or funerary walls niches[47]. It is highly unlikely, however, that these low-cost spaces will succeed in significantly increasing the social mix in cemeteries, particularly since the hunting down of "unauthorised graves" in the countryside is set to drive demand from the poorest families towards the urban centres.

Promoting green funerals and graves

Measures such as reducing the size of interment plots, lowering their cost and shortening their duration are also helping to satisfy the need for sustainable urban development, something from which the funeral industry is not exempt. Already on the agenda during the Maoist era, this principle of reducing the ecological footprint of death is beginning to take root in contemporary China in the form of "green funerals and graves" (*luse binzang*), a concept that echoes the "green burials" currently in fashion in the English-speaking world.

This trend marks the advent in China of what some describe as the "second funeral revolution" (*dierci geming*). Following the spread of cremation in the cities, the next stage consists in eliminating ashes entirely by returning them to nature. One of the first steps in this direction was to organise the scattering of ashes at sea in Shanghai in 1991. Environmentally friendly and tinged with romanticism, this act was exemplified by the dispersion of the remains of the regime's high-ranking dignitaries[48] in rivers (Zhou Enlai in 1976) and at sea

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[46] Roseates Newsletter no. 3, http://users.telenet.be/avatar/roseates/Roseates_Newsletter_No_3.pdf

[47] In March 2009, 10,560 square metres and 5,500 plots were freed up as part of this programme involving 22 cemeteries (*Binzang wenhua yanjiu* [*Research on Funeral Culture*], Shanghai Funeral Culture Research Institute, p.19, No. 57, 2009).

[48] Note that the great advocate of cremation himself, Mao Zedong, was not cremated but mummified. His funeral was an occasion of pomp and ceremony the likes of which had never been seen before and his mausoleum occupies a building measuring 34 metres high on Tiananmen Square (Wakeman, 1998).

(Deng Xiaoping in 1997). After twenty years, however, the situation remains rather unconvincing: despite promotional campaigns and municipal subsidies making it almost free, this type of burial accounts for no more than 1% of Shanghai deaths. Then again, with ash scattering in China being undertaken in assembly-line fashion on large boats holding several families, the Chinese are unfamiliar with the intimacy associated with this practice in other cultures. Above all, the bereaved families take a very dim view of seeing the deceased lose all territorial footing, even though – as the sacredness of the body dictates – they always leave a memorial trace (name and dates) on a communal stele in a cemetery.

The authorities have noted the lack of enthusiasm for this practice amongst the population but they are reluctant to impose it by force for fear of reviving deeply entrenched memories of the Cultural Revolution. Other gentler formats have been tested such as areas devoted to "green" graves (trees or plants) in landscaped cemeteries. Here, too, the deceased occupies a space, albeit tiny, by having their name inscribed on an individual or communal stele. The idea of tending these graves with well-dosed watering is undeniably attractive but it is a double-edged sword in Chinese culture, according to which any withering of the plant-grave could be seen as a bad omen. Rare are those families, then, who accept to sacrifice tradition for these green burials, with the exception of the poorest families who benefit from "welfare grave" schemes.

Conclusion

The funeral industry has succeeded in rising from the ashes at a time when China is entering its fourth decade as an open economy. Its reorganisation in various production and service sectors is even establishing it as one of the pillars of the national economy. This revival owes much to Shanghai's entrepreneurial tradition, which has been enriched through early contact with other funerary cultures and stimulated by the specific constraints posed by urban overexpansion.

The private landscaped cemetery has established itself as the ideal combination of a refined tradition retaining certain symbolic elements and a modernity that seeks to domesticate death. It represents the cornerstone of an ambitious funeral industry that is being increasingly professionalised and conforming to international standards in an attempt to become more commonplace. However, the clusters of "cemetery-gardens" spreading throughout Shanghai will be unable to absorb the expected increase in the number of deaths over the coming decades; hence the gentle guidance of the authorities in order to limit the footprint of gravesites and reduce their cost, whether by making them smaller, more natural or by eliminating interment plots. Described as a "second funeral revolution", this process is a continuation of the secularisation of funerals that was initiated during the Maoist era. It is in harmony with current environmental concerns and as such has adorned itself with new attributes of modernity. Nevertheless, the accompanying policy of improving the "social mix" in cemeteries will not be enough to satisfy the growing demand for low-cost graves, which is set to rise along with the jump in the number of deaths and the disappearance of a certain portion of village cemeteries from suburban areas. A class distinction will emerge according to the size of the memorial trace left on the land, with wealthy families occupying large graves in cemeteries and the poor contenting themselves at most with their name engraved on a stele.

Certain sectors of the funeral industry remain under-developed due to the “capturing” of corpses by the *binyiguan*. Breaking the stranglehold of these operators would allow the private sector to gain a foothold in highly lucrative services such as the organisation of funeral ceremonies and corpse preparation. The authorities, however, prefer to diversify their own supplies and services into the luxury sector, thus avoiding opening the floodgates to religious practices which, in China’s major cities, sixty years of Communism have so far successfully contained.

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